

What is Burnout?

The term “burnout” is a relatively new term, first coined in 1974 by Herbert Freudenberger, in his book, *Burnout: The High Cost of High Achievement*. He originally defined burnout as, “the extinction of motivation or incentive, especially where one’s devotion to a cause or relationship fails to produce the desired result.”

Burnout is a reaction to prolonged or chronic job stress and is characterized by three main dimensions: exhaustion, cynicism (less identification with the job), and feelings of reduced professional ability. The stress that contributes to burnout can come mainly from your job, but stress from your overall lifestyle can add to this stress. Personality traits and thought patterns, such as perfectionism and pessimism, can contribute as well.

Most people spend the majority of their waking hours working. And if you hate your job, dread going to work, and don’t gain any satisfaction out of what you’re doing, it can take a serious toll on your life.

While burnout isn’t a diagnosable psychological disorder, that doesn’t mean it shouldn’t be taken seriously. Here are some of the most common signs of burnout:

Alienation from work-related activities: Individuals experiencing burnout view their jobs as increasingly stressful and frustrating. They may grow cynical about their working conditions and the people they work with. They may also emotionally distance themselves and begin to feel numb about their work.

Physical symptoms: Chronic stress may lead to physical symptoms, like headaches and stomachaches or intestinal issues.

Emotional exhaustion: Burnout causes people to feel drained, unable to cope, and tired. They often lack energy to get their work done.

Reduce performance: Burnout mainly affects everyday tasks to work---or in the home when someone’s main job involves caring for family members. Individuals with burnout feel negative about tasks. They have difficulty concentrating and often lack creativity. Individuals experiencing burnout may be at a higher risk of developing depression.

A high-stress job doesn’t always lead to burnout. If stress is managed well, there may not be any ill-effects. But some individuals (and those in certain occupations) are at a higher risk than others. The 2019 National Physician Burnout, Depression, and Suicide Report found that 44 percent of physicians’ experience

burnout.

Their heavy workloads place individuals with certain personality characteristics and lifestyle features at a higher risk of burnout.

Of course, it's not just physicians who are burning out. Workers in every industry at every level are at potential risk. According to a 2018 report by Gallup, employee burnout has four main causes:

Unreasonable time pressure. Employees who say they have enough time to do their work are 70 percent less likely to experience high burnout. Individuals who are not able to gain more time, such as paramedics and firefighters, are at a higher risk of burnout.

Lack of communication and support from a manager. Manager support offers a psychological buffer against stress. Employees who feel strongly supported by their manager are 70 percent less likely to experience burnout on a regular basis.

Unmanageable workload. When a workload feels unmanageable, even the most optimistic employees will feel hopeless. Feeling overwhelmed can quickly lead to burnout.

Unfair treatment. Employees who feel they are treated unfairly at work are 2.3 times more likely to experience a high level of burnout. Unfair treatment may include things such as favoritism, unfair compensation, and mistreatment from a co-worker.

Although the term “burnout” suggests it may be a permanent condition, it's reversible. An individual who is feeling burned out may need to make some changes to their work environment.

Approaching the human resource department about problems in the workplace or talking to a supervisor about the issues can be helpful if they are invested in creating a healthier work environment. In some cases, a change in position or a new job altogether may be necessary to put an end to burnout.

It can also be helpful to develop clear strategies that help you manage your stress. Self-care strategies, like eating a healthy diet, getting plenty of exercises, and engaging in healthy sleep habits may help reduce some of the effects of a high-stress job.

A vacation may offer you some temporary relief too, but a week away from the office won't be enough to help you beat burnout. Regularly scheduled breaks from work, along with daily renewal exercises, can be key to helping you combat burnout.

If you are experiencing burnout and you're having difficulty finding your way out, or you are suffering a mental health condition such as depression, be sure to talk to your health care provider